



January 2014

Is there a future for mountain lions, wolves and black bears in Illinois?

The recent occurrence of a mountain lion in Whiteside County has generated much public discussion about the future of this species in Illinois. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources welcomes that discussion, and believes it's equally important to talk about the possible return of other apex predators such as the gray wolf and the American black bear.

While we believe this and other recent confirmed mountain lion sightings are isolated occurrences for now, we have been actively preparing for the time when mountain lions, wolves, and black bears may once again establish populations in the state. We have funded scientific research where suitable habitat models have been developed for these species, and have also researched attitudes and opinions of Illinoisans regarding these large carnivores.

In the spring of 2011, we supported a bill in the General Assembly (HB 1437) that sought to add the gray wolf, American black bear, and mountain lion to the list of protected species under the Illinois Wildlife Code. While that effort was not successful, the IDNR remains interested in finding ways to achieve protections for these animals by working cooperatively with a wide range of constituencies.

We believe there is room on our Illinois landscape for apex predators, but these species also will require management as they re-establish and grow in numbers to deal with human-wildlife interactions, nuisance animals, and to keep a balance in predator-prey numbers within suitable habitat areas. Placing the species on the protected list is a necessary step.

The agency is also trying to educate and inform residents on wildlife-human interactions and their role in wildlife management, and has worked with the University of Illinois Extension to develop a useful website, "Living with Wildlife in Illinois": <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/wildlife/>

While our attitude surveys revealed that a large number of people in Illinois support carnivore protection, they also show that a majority of people don't want them close to their home. Like so many of the resources that we manage, we recognize that there are differing views on how mountain lions, and other large predators, should be managed within the state.

Our current work is focused on understanding people's views on these carnivores and other wildlife, including urban and rural residents and all other cross-sections of citizens in the state, and then using that information to manage this resource in a way that best meets the needs and expectations of our residents. In the near future we will be sharing the results of public surveys on these issues on the "Living with Wildlife" website.

Aldo Leopold, the father of modern conservation, wrote his 1933 book Game Management at the time when much of North America's big game animals, like wolves and deer, were nearly extinct, and the wildlife management profession was beginning to be institutionalized. Leopold stated, "The hope of the

future lies not in curbing the influence of human occupancy – it is already too late for that – but in creating a better understanding of the extent of that influence and a new ethic for its governance.”

In the eighty years since, we have seen great strides in conservation and species recovery, including deer, wild turkeys, coyotes, beaver, raccoons, river otters and large carnivores. Countless sportsmen, conservationists, land owners, environmentalists, and natural resource professionals have all played a significant part in these accomplishments. Now we must focus on the next step of creating a better understanding and new ethics to support the future management and protection of large carnivores in Illinois.

Yours in Conservation,

Marc Miller
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